

Starting from Scratch: A Recipe for FLES Programs

Peggy Sharkey

*Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES
Language and Culture Resource Center*

Synopsis: Broaden support for FLES by partnering with your local PTA and BOCES.

Are you interested in cooking up a Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) program from readily available ingredients? By partnering with your local PTA and BOCES, your district can implement extracurricular language programs, one step in the process of broadening support for FLES. Parental involvement is a key element to success in establishing FLES programs. In addition, BOCES can both provide institutional support through their Cooperative Service Agreements (Co-Sers), some of which are aidable. Mixing these two key ingredients may help you achieve your goal of establishing a vibrant FLES program.

Ingredient #1: PTAs

Recognizing the significant role that parents play in establishing FLES programs, members of the NYSAFLT community, including Linda Zusman, Judy Martialay, and Louise Terry, obtained the support of the NYS PTA, which produced a position statement in 2006. In this statement, the NYS PTA promotes “. . . the addition of foreign language study to the curriculum for young children [because it] believes that it would be a motivation for future study of languages and cultures, which seems increasingly necessary in this global society, and it would also increase reading skills overall.”

Parents are often the best advocates for FLES programs. In fact, your role as a parent advocate within your child’s district may be more significant than your role as a teacher advocate in the district in which you work. It is important not to overlook the

impact on foreign language instruction that you can have in the community in which you live.

I came to realize this when my son entered kindergarten in 2001. At that time, I decided that I wanted to contribute to the school community by organizing a language program. As a PTA volunteer, I have found it relatively simple to establish weekly language clubs that meet before and after school (usually for multiple eight-week sessions). To give you an idea of how simple it can be, let me provide a few details. A parent volunteer identifies language teachers, announces the program to the school, and organizes the registration. The teachers, who work as independent contractors, are paid directly by the parents. Scholarships are offered upon request. Scholarships can be made available from either PTA funds or the teachers, who agree to accept a maximum number of scholarship students.

Since 2001, the language clubs have spread to six additional schools, including the middle school. These clubs offer hundreds of students the opportunity to explore the commonly taught languages of Spanish and French, as well as less commonly taught languages such as American Sign Language, Chinese, and Russian. Last year, once all of the PTAs had become involved in offering language clubs, we decided to increase our offerings by creating a district-wide summer program. At this point, our local BOCES became involved, offering some of the infrastructure that was needed to organize such a program.

Before discussing the role of BOCES, I would like to provide examples of PTA involvement in other districts. In many districts, PTAs have taken on a significant role in establishing FLES programs. In fact, some PTAs are so committed that they have taken the additional steps needed to set up nonprofit corporations to focus on the long-term support of these programs. Two parent-generated nonprofits with impressive track records are Educational Programs and Shu Ren.

In 1975, the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations in Virginia established educational programs when budgets were cut for FLES programs. Yearly, this nonprofit enrolls approximately 5,000 students from 123 elementary schools in Spanish, French, and Mandarin classes. In each school, a parent must volunteer to coordinate the classes, which are supported by program fees.

In 2000, Shu Ren was created in Portland, Oregon, to support the immersion program in Mandarin. Its activities are supported by membership dues, grants, and fund-raising. Collaborating with the school community, including local businesses enhances the immersion program by funding educational resources, such as field trips, cultural activities, and teaching materials. In order to provide a culminating experience, Shu Ren supports an academic trip to China for its students in 8th grade.

Ingredient #2: BOCES

In New York State, districts are fortunate to have an additional resource at their fingertips: their local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). Through its Cooperative Service Agreements (Co-Sers), BOCES can provide many services to support LOTE. A Co-Ser is an agreement approved by the New York State Education Department to establish a shared service between a BOCES and two or more districts. The Enrichment Co-Ser, for example, provides a cost-effective manner to set up language courses that occur during the traditional school day, before and after school, on weekends, and during summers. The Itinerant Services Co-Ser, which makes it possible for districts to share teachers, is a perfect match for smaller language programs, including those focusing on LCTL and FLES

As our PTA began planning for the summer program mentioned above, it became evident that it would be beneficial to partner with the Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex (WSWHE) BOCES. The PTA took the step of formalizing the program by creating a collaboration that included the district and BOCES. This three-way collaboration varies from situation to situation, but the partners generally take on the following roles.

When developing an extracurricular enrichment program, the partners agree on the program parameters; namely, the classes being offered, scheduling, and location. Then they divvy up the responsibilities. The PTA usually provides the direct contact with the families. It can promote the program, collect program fees, raise funds, and provide scholarships. The district provides the space, receives the parent-generated contributions to the program, and pays the BOCES. It may also choose to contribute to the program

costs and/or offer scholarships, if its budget allows. It also coordinates transportation, if that is an issue. The BOCES hires the staff and purchases the supplies. It can also assist with program development and registration. The on-site program administration can be handled by either the district or the BOCES.

In addition to providing this infrastructure, a partnership with BOCES may make your program more cost effective. Although BOCES services are fee-based, these costs might be offset by the significant savings your district may receive in state aid. Regarding the costs, it is likely that your district already pays a base fee to participate in an enrichment Co-Ser. An administration fee may also be incurred, depending on the degree of responsibility taken on by the BOCES. On the other hand, by participating with a BOCES, many of the program costs (for example, salaries and materials) are eligible for state aid, which means a portion of the overall cost is returned to the district the following year. In order to better understand the financial implications of partnering with the BOCES, it is a good idea to contact your school business administrator.

Prep Time: Worth the Investment

Just as dough rises steadily once some very basic ingredients are mixed and placed in an appropriate environment, LOTE programs can flourish following the recipe outlined above. In our region, these models of partnering are spreading, encouraged by the added support of a FLAP grant. More districts are considering after-school programs and the summer program is evolving as more districts become involved, more students participate, and more languages are offered.

This recipe isn't complicated, but it requires a perspective that includes complementary short-term and long-term goals. The most time-consuming step, community-building, is critical to the overall success of the program because establishing language programs involves more than just offering another set of classes; it involves cultural change. We are aiming for a culture that recognizes (minimally) and values (optimally) the significant role that global communication skills play in the 21st century.

The greatest single outcome of these extracurricular programs is garnering the support needed to establish FLES. As students, parents, teachers, and administrators

experience firsthand the magic of interacting with other languages and cultures, it becomes easier to have meaningful discussions about the complicated task of establishing a program for elementary students within the school day. The more community members in your district that experience that “Ah ha!” moment brought on by observing a child effortlessly “picking up” a language and the more these community members begin to leave behind their personal experience of struggling in high school to pass a language course only to forget (almost) everything in a relatively short time, the greater the chance is that you will find the collaborators needed to establish a FLES program. Many of these collaborators will be not only willing; they will be passionate.

Voilà: FLES

Although these programs are becoming popular, time and money constraints cause limitations related to curriculum and instruction matters, as well as accessibility issues. Curriculum development is minimal, it is difficult to find qualified teachers, and most children are unable to participate. That’s the bad news.

The good news is that once these limitations are perceived and the goals of the program valued, they serve as catalysts for discussing FLES, the option that directly addresses these limitations. In the case that I am sharing with you, I am happy to say that a FLES committee has been established on a district-wide level. Principals, elementary school teachers, LOTE teachers, and parents have been convened to make FLES recommendations. During this process, we have surveyed parents, receiving responses that represented 825 children (27% of the total population). One compelling outcome of this survey was the fact that 43% of the children had participated in the PTA-sponsored program and 97% of these children reported having had a positive experience. I think this base of support explains the healthy return rate of the surveys and the fact that 85% of the parents support the establishment of a FLES program.

The district is now willing; we will see if it is able. We hope that the time spent involving parents from the beginning will pay off during the process of developing a budget and voting for its approval. In the meantime, we will continue to enhance the extracurricular opportunities that are available to our students.

The Table Is Set

Feel free to modify this recipe based on the unique circumstances present in your district. Remember: a good cook adeptly adjusts a recipe after considering the ingredients on hand. A good cook spices up a dish considering the diners' preferences. A good cook experiments!

¡Que aproveche! Bon appétit!

Resources

A Primer about BOCES, New York State Education Department, July 2004

<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/mgtserv/BOCES/APrimerAboutBOCES.htm>

Co-Sers 101: An Introduction to BOCES Services, New York State Education Department, April 2003

www.emsc.nysed.gov/mgtserv/BOCES_forms/101_Cosers_web_newversion.ppt

Families Supporting Portland Public Schools' Mandarin Immersion Program, Shu Ren of Portland

<http://www.shurenofportland.org/>

Foreign Language in Elementary Schools, Bethesda, MD

www.fles.org/index.html

New York State PTA Board of Managers' Statement on Early Childhood Foreign Language Education, New York State PTA, March 2006

<http://www.nyspta.org/CMT/Publications/ForeignLanguageStatementweb.pdf>

Washington-Saratoga-Warren-Hamilton-Essex BOCES, Language and Culture Resource Center

www.wswheboces.org